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# The Social Dimensions of Rationality

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# EXPRESSIONS OF FAITH

## TESTIMONIES OF LATTER-DAY SAINT SCHOLARS

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CHAPTER 7

# THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF RATIONALITY

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I RECENTLY ATTENDED a conference on religious advocacy sponsored by a group of Christian scholars who feel that religious belief is unduly restricted in academic discourse. The starting point for the conference was the evident fact that political convictions are freely advocated in classrooms and scholarly writing. These political positions are ideological and value laden, so why not introduce religious views too? If history can be taught from a Marxist perspective, why not from a Christian viewpoint?

At the conference, scholars with a wide range of personal outlooks, some religious, some not, addressed the question of how their personal beliefs affected their teaching and writing. The paper of one of the less-believing participants reminded me of how academics commonly think of Mormon belief. He was looking for an outer limit to what rational people would dare bring into serious academic conversation, and the example he chose was Joseph Smith. Forgetting that I was a Latter-day Saint, he proposed the idea of an angel delivering gold plates as an example of a religious phantasm so far beyond the boundaries of plausibility as to preclude any consideration in college classrooms or scholarly writing.

When we got to the discussion segment of that session, I

reminded him that I had written a book on Joseph Smith founded on the very assumption that an angel delivered golden plates on a New York hillside.[1] The writer did not press his point and generously acknowledged in private conversation that he should read my study of Joseph's early life. Neither of us suffered embarrassment, but his candor brought out an attitude that I know many of my colleagues share. Belief in angels is beyond the pale of academic conversation. After all, what can be said about events so far beyond the bounds of ordinary experience?

Belief in angels and golden plates apparently does not disqualify a person for other kinds of scholarly activity. I am asked to give papers and review books and have never felt that my religion prevents me from engaging in all the usual routines of modern academic life. Apparently, the crazy Mormon side of my mind is envisioned as sequestered in some watertight compartment where it cannot infect my rational processes. Beliefs inhabit a realm of feeling and traditional loyalties where we are not called to rational account and where eccentricities and bizarre ideas can be tolerated. Probably my colleagues have peculiar notions of their own that they would not want to defend before a panel of academic critics.

When a graduate student or a colleague does ask about my beliefs, I am often asked if I was reared a Mormon. The question is, of course, a hypothesis. They are explaining my belief not as a rational choice made in the face of other choices but as one component of an elaborate cultural system intertwined with my family, the culture of my home, loyalty to old friends, the fundamentals of my personal identity. They think I am Mormon the way many people are Jewish or Polish; they think that's simply me. My belief in the angel and the plates cannot be extricated from my personal culture. I am a Mormon, they implicitly presume, not because I *believe* in Mormonism. I believe in Mormonism because I *am* a Mormon—by upbringing, affection, and cultural construction.

I accept this explanation and go one step further. I believe in the doctrine and the miraculous events because they sustain life. I need them to carry on from day to day. The God whom I worship and who dwells in the midst of Mormon scriptures is the God who heals me when I am wounded, who corrects me when I err, who restores



me to good when I fall into evil. My religion is a crutch, an absolutely necessary crutch that I need to hobble on through life. Far from rationally judging every historical event in the fabulous life of Joseph Smith or weighing the worth of each doctrine, I believe in the God of the Mormon scriptures because I need that God. My beliefs grow in the dark, warm realm of feelings, the place of fears and agonizing human needs, of desires beyond naming, the place where my soul has its roots.

All this is a simple fact of my religious life, perhaps of all religious life. Does this mean, therefore, that all religious doctrine is irrational, that all the events of Mormon history are beyond discourse, that one cannot make an argument for Mormon beliefs? Obviously not. Those arguments are made constantly. I have myself made a historical case for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Hugh Nibley has devoted his life to assembling evidence in rational support of Mormon scriptures. The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) has mobilized an army of people who publish hundreds of pages a year in support of our beliefs. This scholarship is not generally acknowledged outside of Mormon circles, but that does not mean it is trivial. The people at FARMS are trained in accredited graduate schools, learned in languages, informed about current scholarship, and careful in argumentation. They abide by all the canons of rational discourse. Nor can it be claimed that they are emotionally unbalanced or congenitally stupid. They bear every evidence of psychological stability and intellectual acuity. These people, and many others not directly associated with FARMS, have brought their considerable powers to bear in support of Mormon beliefs about history and God. If my colleagues consider my beliefs outside the realm of rational discourse, these Mormon apologists do not. They maintain, and I concur, that a more persuasive argument can be made for belief in God and Christ through the Book of Mormon than through any of the arguments of conventional Christianity.

The cultural position of Mormon belief, then, is strangely anomalous. For me it grows out of family culture, a thousand personal associations, and deep human needs. At the same time, it is girded up with forceful (though never unassailable) rational arguments based on conventional scholarly methods and the rules of rational

discourse. My colleagues are correct in placing my beliefs in the realm of feeling and deep loyalties, where it is tactful not to call for rational explanation; on the other hand, if they wished to take the trouble, I could provide them with shelves of scholarship in support of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's story. Belief is irrational and rational at the same time.

My academic colleagues would explain away the apologist scholarship in the way they account for my belief. All the other Mormon scholars argue on behalf of their faith for the same reasons I do: because they are personally grounded in Mormon society, where they live and move and have their being. Social environment has made Mormons of these people, and they devote their lives to a defense of the faith in order to sustain their own social and personal identities.

This explanation has served to put believing Mormon scholars in their place largely in contrast to another kind of scholarship that is thought to be beyond social loyalties or deep personal needs: the scholarship of science and objective reason, best exemplified by the physical sciences. Over the past four centuries, scientific scholarship has developed rigorous methods for screening out personal preferences and arriving at conclusions based on objective, measurable reality and cool, disinterested reasoning. This kind of scholarship is responsible for breathtaking advances in physics, chemistry, and biology, and it inspires a hope that the study of history and sociology, the sciences of the human spirit, can make comparable progress.

By the standards of this rigorous scientific inquiry, Mormon scholars with their obvious personal commitments do not measure up. To practitioners of objective science, the findings of Mormon scholars are necessarily polluted by their personal interest in the outcome. Mormon scholars have a form of scholarship but deny the power thereof, and hence can be dismissed as special pleaders rather than as serious claimants to objective truth.

That is where Mormon scholarship was located, anyway, until about twenty years ago. Now, that perspective on belief is undergoing a fundamental shift, not because of changes in Mormon scholarship but because of the way modern thinkers are conceiving scholarship as a whole. We live at a moment in history when the Enlightenment dream of scientific scholarship has been eaten away



by doubts about the possibility of scholarly objectivity. A host of thinkers, many of them French, have called into question the very possibility of dispassionate inquiry. They are arguing not merely that objectivity is an impossible achievement for human beings, who can never detach their minds from the rest of their being, but that the pretense of objectivity is an exercise in self-aggrandizement. Objectivity disguises a play for power by those who pretend to the authority of objective scholarship when they are every bit as self-interested in the outcome as any religious apologist. The scientific authorities of an era, according to current theory, claim to speak only for truth against error, when in actuality they stand to benefit by promoting their particular truth and vanquishing all others. No truth, not even the most rigorously scientific, is objective. All truth is colored by personal interest of some sort.

That is harsh criticism of the scientists whom we have all learned to admire, and I, for one, am loath to go all the way with postmodernist thinkers. It is very hard to relinquish faith in some measure of objective scholarship. We all can think of utterly biased and self-serving scholarship that we are sure would not hold up under scrutiny, or history writing that is filled with factual errors. We want to reserve the right to correct this corrupted work in the name of some kind of objective truth.

But if we cannot go all the way with the critics of the Enlightenment, we must at least acknowledge that no scholarship, no truth, exists in a social vacuum. Though it is rarely mentioned in the work itself, all scholarship is tied to a community of some kind and bears the marks of that community's influence. Scholarship is the product of people who are located in institutions—universities, research institutes, or circles of like-minded thinkers. They publish their work and want to have it read by others. Their reputations, promotions, pay raises, and appointments depend on how that work is received. When they write, they use the language, the mannerisms, the forms of their scholarly community. In taking an intellectual position, they silently, but inevitably, associate themselves with people of a similar outlook. Scholars take pleasure in hearing references to their work at scholarly meetings or seeing it mentioned in publications. They can imagine being part of a distinguished community of learned people whose

intelligence and character are admired. In the scholarly work itself, a conclusion is presented as the outcome of careful scrutiny of the facts and rigorous analysis; but the assumptions, the perspective of the work, the fundamental attitude come from some community, from a society with which the scholar is implicitly and probably quite hopefully associating.

Every form of scholarship is rooted in a society, an imagined community of scholars in which the teachers or writers live and move and have their being. We cannot take a position on a scholarly issue without implicitly forming or breaking a social relationship. Everything we write and say links us to other people, with all the tangled consequences for our self-esteem, our personal identities, our hopes and aspirations. There is a social and personal dimension to every form of rational discourse, which means that all beliefs, not merely religious beliefs, are both rational and irrational. We may indeed become persuaded rationally that the Book of Mormon is a nineteenth-century production. There may be hundreds of facts we can invoke to sustain this position. But in making that assertion we are forming and breaking human relationships that unavoidably influence our thinking, just as the memories of a religious upbringing (or of a transforming conversion) coil around the work of the Mormon apologists.

The explanation for faith that I imagine in the minds of my academic colleagues has never intimidated me. I acknowledge my subjectivity and the influence of a million personal associations. But this recognition of my own limitations has made me deeply skeptical of all who claim to escape their subjectivity, who think they have rid themselves of the prejudices of their tribe. We all have our tribes. The desire to form tribes, to join tribes, to triumph within our tribes drives and shapes our scholarship. Every form of discourse, every rationality is rooted in a society and serves social purposes. However much we enjoy the pursuit of truth for its own sake, these social purposes are preeminent. Without a society behind the scholarship, we would never do the research or write the books. Every truth is socially conditioned and socially motivated. When we take an intellectual position, we are announcing the society to which we wish to belong and the kind of people we want to be. The very explanation



that my academic colleagues offer for my belief is what I use to understand theirs. All truth, Mormon and scientific, is of necessity social truth and profoundly conditioned by human associations. The pretenses of Enlightenment scholarship have been torn away in recent decades, and the inescapable contingencies of this profoundly human endeavor have been laid bare.

In what, then, can we put our trust? If truth always grows from a particular society, how do we choose among the perplexing confusions of multiple and conflicting truths? If the Enlightenment quest has faltered and the pursuit of knowledge seems mired in subjectivity, if scholarship is entwined in the corrupting pursuit of power, what can we cling to? What can replace objective scientific truth as a foundation for culture and personal identity? Where do we go when we are post-Enlightenment, postmodern, post-everything?

I begin with an insistent question that shoulders aside even truth in demanding our attention: How should we live a life? It may take a long time to discover the truth, especially if we follow the tortuous path of scientific rigor. But we must answer the question of how to live a life every second of every day. We may have only tentative answers, to be replaced from day to day, but some answer we must find for the inescapable query, What is good? What is worth pursuing? What should we give our time to? How should we treat other people? How should we think of them? How should we feel and act? These questions thrust themselves insistently upon us and demand immediate answers in our actions and thoughts. We cannot wait to hear from science or the universities about these matters. We are in the middle of the fray the minute we open our eyes each morning.

We sometimes think that if we knew the true, then we would know the good. The right way to live should grow out of the right way to understand. A goodness based on falsehood would be faith built on the sand. The true and the good should come together, we want to think, and indeed may be close to equivalent. In the pragmatic tradition that has influenced my thinking, I carry that hope one step further to say that what we find to be truly good is the truth. The only truth we can know is the truth that works.

One of the perplexities of academic scholarship is how it shies away from goodness. Classroom teachers make a point of saying that

they have no intention of telling students how to live their lives. It is true that a certain set of moral precepts grows out of scholarship—accuracy of expression, an honest reading of evidence, clarity of reasoning, diligence, empathy. But objective scholarship will not reveal what it means to be a good husband or wife, how to learn to be generous, how to bless people. Those who are academics have values, of course, but they bring these political and ethical principles into their teaching from other sources—from their religious backgrounds, their families, their communities. Except in the narrow realm of scholarly methods, the Enlightenment pursuit of truth does not provide answers to the question of how to live a life. In fact, it explicitly denies responsibility for finding the good. Scholarship has no doctrine of repentance because it has no doctrine of good. I consider that a damning lack.

Scientific scholarship is the official truth of our culture. The government will grant you money to investigate questions by scientific methods; you will never get money to answer inquiries by spiritual means. And yet, that official culture holds no promise of ultimately discovering what is good or of helping people to attain it. We are left on our own to discover the truth that teaches us what is worth doing in life and how to be a good person.

As I said at the outset, I find goodness in the God of the Mormon scriptures. There I find truth to live by, which to my way of thinking is the most significant, the most useful, the most compelling kind of truth. But is this Mormon truth real? We cannot help asking, Is it anything more than a hopeful fabrication? That question comes from the ghost of the Enlightenment, the ghost that tells us we can escape our subjectivity and find a truth above human frailty, a truth that all reasonable people will be forced to accept. But it is a ghost that speaks to us; the hope of objective truth has been slain. No one is capable of finding that dreamed-of reality by scholarly methods. Objectivity is the claim of people who think they are gods now, not of persons worshiping God and striving to be like him, nor of persons who understand the reality of finite human life without God. It is a magnificent phantasm, a blind and futile aspiration—futile not just because we can never escape ourselves, but because in the end



the Enlightenment project fails us. Even when science has done its work to perfection, it fails to tell us how to live a life.

The Mormon truth, above all, tells us how to be good and helps us to get there. Faith and repentance are wrapped up together. The goodness that I see in the Mormon lives about me, and day after day in my own life when I construct myself as the scriptures direct, is every bit as real as the abstractions of scientific scholarship. I can, if I wish, cast an aura of rationality over this belief in an effort to explain and justify myself to my academic colleagues. Our valiant apologists will go on defending the faith with scholarly evidence, to keep up our connection with the academic establishment. But I hold to my beliefs not because of the evidence or the arguments but because I find our Mormon truth good and yearn to install it at the center of my life. After losing many followers when he taught an especially hard doctrine, Jesus asked his disciples, "Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life" (John 6:67–68). The truth we have is truth to live by.

NOTE

1. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).